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"REDS" AS HISTORY

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I must begin this essay on a personal note. At the conclusion of "Reds" my name appears in the credits as historical consultant. Since on this side of the Atlantic it may seem unusual to criticize a work in which one has taken part (in France nobody blinked an eye when the playful Roland Barthes reviewed his own book), I wish to be quite specific about my minor role in the production of the film. Beginning in 1972 (three years before my book, Romantic Revolutionary: A Biography of John Reed, was first published), Warren Beatty and I talked occasionally -- sometimes in person, sometimes over the phone -- about the film on John Reed that he was always just about to make. Our conversations dealt with Reed, Louise Bryant, their friends and associates and the historical era in which they lived. In 1979, when shooting was about to begin, we formalized our association with a contract. The talks continued, not only with Beatty, but also with others involved in the production. I also read the screenplay and offered criticisms and suggestions, both historical and dramatic. During shooting, I was occasionally asked specific questions about

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\* This essay has benefitted from conversations with my friends and fellow historians Joseph Boskin, David J. Fisher, and Clayton Koppes, and I wish to thank them for sharing their ideas with me.

such things as the number of delegates to the Socialist Party convention in 1919, or the contents of Bryant's and Reed's letters when they were separated. In the spring of 1980 I spent a few days on location with the film company in Spain.

A major disappointment during this period was that Beatty politely, but firmly refused my generous offer to play the role of Trotsky in the film. My desire involved a dramatic, rather than a political, judgment. Trotsky has, I have always thought, the best single line of the entire Russian Revolution. From the podium of the ballroom in Smolny Institute on November 7, 1917, he looks down "with a pale, cruel face" (John Reed's description) and thunders at those opponents of the Bolsheviks who are withdrawing from the meeting in protest, "They are just so much refuse which will be swept into the garbage-heap of history!" One might equally well use this phrase to describe what most historical films do to their unwitting subjects. In what follows, I wish to examine to what extent John Reed and his associates have suffered from such a fate.

## I

The title is uncompromising, bold, forthright. Once the pre-release jokes about catering to a drug subculture or Cincinnati baseball fans are put aside, once the wry comparisons to that other sharp, four-letter title, "Jaws," are cleared away, there is no hiding the basic fact: this is a film about radicals and revolutionaries, people unafraid to take upon themselves an appellation despised in

America, people unafraid to call themselves Communists. Yet, as producer-director Warren Beatty has insisted, as the advertisements have shown and the reviews have underscored, "Reds" is basically a love story. But it is a particular love story set in a particular historical period among a particular set of people. By choosing the United States between 1915 and 1920, by taking as his main characters John Reed and Louise Bryant, by recreating aspects of the subculture in which they lived, by overtly confronting the origins of the American Communist Party and the first, stormy days of the Comintern, and by framing the film with a series of historical "witnesses" who lived through that period, Beatty has chosen to make a historical statement. To insist "Reds" is only a love story is to accept a kind of one-dimensionality, to deny the very real influence of motion pictures on our lives and to attempt to escape the implications of this powerful medium.

This denial of responsibility should not go uncontested. "Reds" is important not merely because of that well-noted irony -- \$33 million, perhaps more, to tell the story of a revolutionary and founder of the Communist Labor Party -- but because it is one of those rare Hollywood films to deal with the subject of native radicalism. How odd this seems. In certain quarters a myth persists of a "Red Decade" in Hollywood. Congressional Committees in the forties and fifties rather enjoyed investigating the "Communist influence" in Hollywood. One result was the jailing of ten unfriendly witnesses for contempt of Congress; another was a blacklist which kept hundreds of people from working at their trade for many years. Yet the objective

record shows how unwarranted were right-wing fears of subversion in Hollywood. Judged by the contents of films, there was no "Red Decade." Radicals there were in the film industry, but their politics rarely made it to the screen except in the most oblique fashion. The HUAC had to be content with lines like "Share and share alike, that's democracy" as baleful examples of Communist influence.

Consider this: only once before "Reds" has an American motion picture chronicled the life of a historical, native radical. It took a Swedish director to make a film about Joe Hill, the IWW organizer and song-writer who died at the hands of a firing squad in Utah in 1915, and an Italian company to tell the story of Sacco and Vanzetti, the anarchists whose Massachusetts death sentences were such a cause celebre in the twenties. Until now, the only comparable native production has been "Bound for Glory" (1977), work based upon the life of folk-singer Woody Guthrie. (For some reason, Hollywood has done better with foreign radicals, especially Mexican. Whatever their artistic merits, "Viva Villa" and "Viva Zapata" deal with revolutionaries.) Unlike "Reds," "Bound for Glory" waffles over its hero's political connections, ignores his relationship to the Communist Party and never mentions his weekly column in the People's World (the West Coast CP newspaper). Guthrie comes across as a man of the people, the balladeer of dustbowl migrants who suffer from ecological disaster and exploitation at the hands of large landowners. His forbears are as much cinematic as historical, and, in its message, the film a kind of "Grapes of Wrath" revisited. Guthrie's views seem a combination of Tom Joad in his final speech ("Wherever a man is

being hit on the head with a billy-club, I'll be there") and of the Preacher Casey, whose mystical vision of radical togetherness is much closer to Emerson's Oversoul than Marx's Dialectics.

This has been typical of the Hollywood approach to radicalism. The nineteen thirties brought forth a number of films in which common people were downtrodden and oppressed by rich businessmen or bankers -- usually played by portly Edward Arnold, who seemed to have dollar signs on his tie-pin -- but never did a real radical lead a revolt. Instead, any revolutionary thrust dissolved into a sentimental insistence upon the Christian virtues of "little people" banding together, caring for one another, indulging in brotherly love and hoping for the future. Frank Capra was the master of the genre, his "Meet John Doe" and "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," morality plays in which Evil, no matter how powerful, managed to defeat itself by the end of the third reel. Sixties radicalism on film was more sophisticated about the staying power of evil, but equally defensive in stance. Villains in that decade remain unnamed and the focus of radical anger diffuses into a generalized hatred for an entire "sick society." The apolitical "Easy Rider" becomes a hero, and his arbitrary death at the hands of rednecks -- like the brutal manhandling by police of the virtuous undergraduates of "Strawberry Statement" -- is transformed into a symbol of the left's ultimate impotence.

Compared to all this, "Reds" is an audacious undertaking. It is the first Hollywood film to make a hero of a Communist, the first to suggest the existence of a bohemian-radical subculture during the



second decade of the century, the first to hint at the bitter issues that shattered world radical movements at the time of the Russian Revolution, and certainly the first to have an all-American couple bed down to the stirring strains of the "Internationale." For an American public generally ignorant of, and either indifferent or hostile to, the whole notion of radicalism, it is bound to provide an image -- perhaps the only image -- of what the native left is all about. This alone means that the film's historical contents must be taken seriously, and makes it worthwhile to explore just what "Reds" is saying about American radicalism, the history of our century, and -- not so incidentally -- the nature of history itself.

## II

To analyze "Reds" as history, one must begin with its most obviously historical device, the "Witnesses." The film is framed with the comments of these elderly men and women who were Reed's contemporaries (in time, if not always in space), and their recollections provide its historical backbone. From them we learn of Bohemian pranks in Greenwich Village, of free love and affairs and who was sleeping with whom. They describe the radicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World, the anti-war movement in the United States, the coming of the Russian Revolution, the Allied attempts to strangle Bolshevism and the repression of dissent at home. Most importantly, they recall the relationship of Jack Reed and Louise Bryant and also reflect philosophically on the meaning of their

turbulent lives.

Judged by reviews, the "Witnesses" are one of the most successful aspects of the film. The only recurrent criticism concerns the failure to identify them with name tags. It has been suggested that this was done in response to an aesthetic judgment, to a desire not to make the film seem too much like a documentary. Perhaps. But the overall thrust of "Reds" suggests a deeper reason. To name the "Witnesses" would be to make them more accountable for what they say. As it is, they have the affect of a latter-day Greek chorus, one which creates the conditions of a world in which the leading characters play out their destiny. Keeping them anonymous is a technique which both impresses and lulls the audience; never can the viewer be certain exactly which remarks on politics, sex, art or the main characters fit together. Thus we are left with the powerful feeling that they were there, they remember these events, they lived through those turbulent times and survived to tell their tales, to reflect upon history. Collectively, they are worthy teachers, the voice of the past, speaking in tones at once personal and impersonal, subjective and objective.

When Beatty in our very first conversation outlined the idea of putting Reed's contemporaries onto film, I thought it to be a brilliant stroke. I still do. But something happened in the execution that transformed an apparently historical device into a profoundly ahistorical one. Beyond the fact that most of the "Witnesses" did not actually know Bryant and Reed (another reason for keeping their identities vague) lies the troubling implication of the

way their remarks are used. On the surface the "Witnesses" are an impressive bunch -- winning, humorous, informative and often forceful as they present alternate versions of the same events. But often they are also vague, forgetful and self-contradictory.

For people mostly in their eighties this is natural enough and certainly no call for criticism. Except that in this case they -- or, more specifically, their memories -- are being used as the historical framework of the film. (Much has been made in reviews of the fifteen years of research supposedly undertaken by Beatty. In fact, there is nothing in "Reds" which cannot easily be found in histories of the period and biographies of Reed and his friends.) For those who care about history, here is the locus of the problem. In the context of "Reds," memory is equated with history. Memory is seen as faulty, and thus history is as well. This approach allows the filmmaker to have it both ways. He can at once indulge himself by playing "historian" and yet ignore -- whenever convenient -- all known techniques of assessing evidence from the past, as well as the findings of previous research and scholarship. To put it more directly: the "Witnesses" ultimately suggest that nobody can know the truth about Reed and Bryant. So the filmmaker can tell us whatever story he wishes (and history be damned!).

### III

Let us take this violation of the very basis of history as given, and go on to see just what story "Reds" chooses to tell. My

focus will be Reed because however much one insists that the film has two principals, it never would have been made had he not achieved journalistic fame, written Ten Days That Shook the World and died a kind of left-wing martyr. Nor might I add did the notion of Bryant and Reed as equals and their love story as central enter the first seven years of conversations between Beatty and me. In fact, this was never voiced until production was under way.

From the first moments of the film it is obvious that John Reed is a man who holds unconventional opinions and does unconventional things. One might even see him as a radical. He describes the war in Europe -- this is 1915, two years before American entry -- as being fought for "profits." On their first meeting he delivers a night-long lecture to Bryant on the connection between capitalism and war (a good Progressive might have done the same). He casually asks Louise, a married woman, to come and live with him. In New York he is part of a lively group of people who reside in Greenwich Village. Most of their time is spent eating, drinking and partying, except for those late night moments when they listen to Emma Goldman -- whose radical edge occasionally disappears into a motherly concern over a good cup of coffee -- warn of the imminent dangers of American involvement in the war.

Eventually it becomes clear that this unconventionality must be radicalism. Reed listens to stories of dreadful conditions among factory workers (who for some unclear reason are gathered in a barn), nods approval to Big Bill Haywood's militant appeals for the IWW, defends the workers in a fracas with police and is knocked down. He

breaks with an apparently "liberal" editor who trims his articles ("Nobody edits my stuff") and says he will publish in the Masses. He leaves a Provincetown summer vacation to cover the 1916 Democratic Convention and returns to (apparently) bore his friends with a night-long lecture on politics. When he learns Louise is having an affair with Eugene O'Neill, he, in the name of personal freedom, ignores what more bourgeois folk would consider a betrayal. When the United States enters the conflict in April, 1917, he bravely takes the platform at a mass meeting to announce "This is not my war," and briefly lands in jail. A socialist tells him that great things are happening in Russia and, blocked from his vocation as journalist by his anti-war opinions, he journeys there, arrives on the eve of the October Revolution, makes a speech of solidarity with the Russian workers and in the excitement of the great ten days is reborn as a Bolshevik.

Almost all these events are more-or-less historically accurate. Liberties are often taken with time and place: Reed certainly did not in 1916 know of Louise's affair with O'Neill (he got wind of it when they separated in the spring of 1917); he did not marry her because of jealousy over O'Neill, but because he faced that dangerous kidney operation and wanted her to be his legal heir; he did not use the marvellous line "Class struggle sure plays hell with your poetry" in 1916, but in 1919 while organizing the CLP; he did not go to France to get Louise in 1917 (she returned to the United States); and certainly they could not have ridden a train from France to Russia in September 1917 without waving away many millions of Allied and German troops (they went by boat from New York to Norway).

Such quibbles aside, one can assert that to this point -- and indeed in the second half as well, following the Bolshevik takeover of Russia -- the film does manage to capture the general direction of Reed's life. But only the surface. Underneath the events on screen lies a chasm, a vast emptiness. Something crucial is missing, something we call motivation. Nowhere does "Reds" really come to grips with or satisfactorily explain just why this privileged Harvard graduate from that stuffy, upper-class Portland background, takes a journey so far along a radical path. Such a question may never trouble movie-goers content that a hero only be committed to defending some sort of ideals. But certainly it is crucial for understanding not only history, but the actions that take place on screen.

To explain Reed's trajectory from Portland through Harvard and Greenwich Village to a grave before the Kremlin Wall, to make sense of his beliefs and death, it is necessary to comprehend the era and milieu in which he lived. And this must be done not through memory but through history which does not fuzz the issues of social change. Reed was a hero for the subculture of Bohemians, artists and radicals that between 1910-1920 had its headquarters in the Village, outposts in other American cities and ties both emotional and personal to similar centers across the Atlantic. This role, achieved through a combination of talent, real literary accomplishment and bravado, was given a kind of official status in 1914 when Walter Lippmann published a New Republic article entitled "Legendary John Reed." The burden of the piece -- alternately admiring, caustic and witty -- was that just five years out of Harvard, Reed was already larger than life, a man

who spilled himself into one enthusiasm after another -- travel, love affairs, labor strikes, modern art, poetry, jail. Others took his actions more seriously. Fifty years later Louis Untermeyer, a co-editor on the Masses, recalled him as "an idealist who combined boisterous humor and a quiet passion for truth . . . Jack remains in my mind as the most vivid figure of the period."

As a hero-figure, Reed embodied and expressed the values and ideals of a subculture. In the decade after 1910, he was surrounded in the Village, Provincetown and Croton by people from the first large generation of middle-class Americans to wrestle seriously with doctrines that had developed in Europe over the course of a century. The intellectual burden of his associates was enormous. Raised as children of late-Victorian America, a society whose intellectual boundaries were capitalism, the Constitution, Christianity and genteel culture, they confronted an immense variety of new social and artistic visions: The works of Marx, Freud, Bergson and Nietzsche; the politics of anarchism, syndicalism, socialism and industrial unionism; the visual Modernism of cubists, futurists and fauves; the shocking writings of Strindberg, Dostoyevsky and D. H. Lawrence; the attractive and disturbing world views contained in notions of feminism and free love.

Unlike some of their European counterparts, these artists and intellectuals exhibited few signs of morbidity or fears of decadence. Bohemia in the United States was too new and playful for such attitudes; besides, they were good enough Americans to believe in Progress, to expect a better future, one in which their divergent

visions would blend into some marvellous new reality. Too easily they spoke the word "Revolution," without much idea of what it might mean beyond an enormous change, a wide-ranging liberation in the realm of art, lifestyle, economics, politics and sexual relationships. To jumble together such diverse spheres was also a national habit. It was an era when the custodians of American culture -- editors, critics, professors, art collectors -- saw themselves as protecting a kind of castle, threatened at once by the vulgarity of the newly-rich and the alien standards of recent immigrants. At the time of the Armory Show in 1913, the New York Times equated the Cubists with bomb-throwing Anarchists. No wonder radicals saw an attack on any rampart as a threat to the entire old bourgeois order.

The shortcomings of "Reds" in depicting this Bohemia lie less in what it shows than what it ignores, less in doctrines voiced than in the important connections it fails to make. A multi-dimensional, vibrant, creative, radical-Bohemian subculture is at once flattened and polarized. Reed's friends hang about bars and restaurants, cavort on the beach, don silly costumes, dance a lot and perform amateurish theatricals. When not with them, Jack is busy sounding off against editors, politicians, police, capitalists, profiteers and the war (later this extends to Right Wing Socialists, the AFL and Communist Party members). Nowhere does "Reds" connect these extremes or indicate that while certainly capable of having fun, the Village folk were dead serious about art, politics and social change, that if they played with life, they also struggled painfully towards new artistic and intellectual visions in works and deeds that have left an enduring



legacy. Merely to name Reed's friends and associates is to chronicle an important era in our cultural life: Max Eastman, Randolph Bourne, Waldo Frank, Floyd Dell, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Alan Seeger, Crystal Eastman, Susan Glaspell, George Cram Cook, John Sloan, George Bellows, George Luks, Jo Davidson, Robert Minor, Marsden Hartley, Robert Edmund Jones, Eugene O'Neill, Margaret Sanger.

More extreme than his contemporaries, Reed in belief was at one with this subculture, anxious for great change on all fronts, vague before 1917 about how it might occur. He arrived in the Village in 1911 with two incompatible desires: to become a great poet and to make a million dollars. At first journalism merely paid his bills, then the vivid reports of Villa's Revolution, which appeared in Metropolitan Magazine in 1914, made him famous. Yet this success did not extend to serious poetry and fiction (he had no trouble selling light, topical verse and slick stories). His best short stories were naturalistic slices which, like the paintings of the Ash Can school, simultaneously celebrated and criticized the seamy underside of urban life, the world of hookers, cops, con men, grifters and ward-heel politicians. These were rejected by the editors of family publications as being "immoral." It was the need for an outlet for this fiction, rather than any political act, which first drew him to the Masses. Then he was swept into the whirlwind of Village life.

Later Reed claimed that "Ideas alone did not mean much to me. . . . It didn't come to me from books that the workers produced all the wealth of the world, which went to those who did not earn it." But the social and intellectual context in which he lived did help to

create a structure of connections between the plight of others and his own situation. Theory joined the contradictions of a commercial culture as Reed experienced them (the incompatible demands of self-expression and the genteel, literary market place) with the contradictions of factory labor (the promise of economic freedom and the reality of unescapable wage slavery). The writer, he came to see, was like the common laborer; he could be hired when needed and fired when what he produced was no longer acceptable to editors or publishers. From there it was but a short step to acceptance of the idea that the World War was also caused by a demand for profits, and that those benefitting economically from the conflict were the same people who wished to squelch change in social and cultural matters.

The war brought personal and political issues to a head. For Reed and his contemporaries, Europe was the much-admired cradle of both high culture and radical movements. With the major powers locked in a struggle that appeared to be destroying "civilization" (including the Socialist International), one reaction was to ignore the war and hold aloft the torch of cultural and intellectual life in the United States. Reed's response was more personal and more complicated. His best writing had been elicited by labor struggles at Paterson and Ludlow, then early in 1914 the experience with Pancho Villa's troops had touched his prose for the first time with a tinge of greatness. In the autumn he journeyed to the Western Front and found a senseless slaughter, justified by patriotic slogans which were voiced with cynicism by politicians and contempt by the troops themselves. That his Village background led him to judge the conflict "A Trader's War"

is not surprising, but his critique had a deeply personal component. The meaningless enormity of the European conflict made it difficult to write well; in fact, he could hardly write at all. For Reed, the artist, the problems of the world out there had now become his own. The anti-war struggle that he waged in the following four years was intimately connected to his struggle to write well. Or as he put it, to have something worth writing about.

After 1914 Reed may be seen as a man in search of a subject to match his radical beliefs and artistic powers. By 1917 he was growing discouraged. The civilization he had seen "change and broaden and sweeten" in the years before 1914 was now gone in the "red blast of war." The proletariat, which some doctrinaire minds expected to stop the conflict through revolution, seemed hopelessly divided, blind to its class interest. Sadly, in the spring of 1917 he wrote, "I am not sure that the working class is capable of revolution." Then came the journey to Petrograd, the drama of the great ten days, the incarnation of revolutionary visions in the flesh of Lenin, Trotsky and the great mass of Russian workers and soldiers. The artist and the radical in Reed caught fire. Now he had a subject worthy of engaging his pen and his deepest beliefs. No wonder his first lengthy article on the revolution reeked with hope phrased in quasi-religious terms: "This proletarian government will last . . . in history, a pillar of fire for mankind forever."

This faith sustained him through the final three years of his life. It carried him through sedition trials and police harassment in the United State in 1918-19, fired him to complete Ten Days That Shook

the World in two months, buoyed him up during the discouraging schisms and endlessly dull meetings (only the fiery confrontations are shown in "Reds") that marked the birth of two Communist parties in the United States. It explains the limitations of Louise's resounding (and apparently telling) speech that in 1919 he had become a power-seeker and was returning to Russia to represent "thirty men in a basement." The answer to this is given later in the film when Reed suggests to Emma Goldman that if she gives up on the revolution, her life will have had no meaning. Here he is obviously thinking of himself.

If Reed's faith, at least in the film, seems unwarranted, that may be due to a too-narrow focus on politics. Jack, in fact, never gave up on art (in his Finnish prison cell he was sketching notes for two novels). At home, war propaganda and repression had shattered Bohemia. Friends like the one-time pacifist Floyd Dell had joined the army, while Anarchist George Bellows had gone from drawing anti-capitalist cartoons to pro-war posters. But in Russia the revolution had apparently unleashed a huge burst of artistic creativity. In 1919-20, Reed met Mayakovsky and his circle of poets, and some of the artists whose startling abstractions were changing the rules of visual art. Such experimentation, encouraged by Commissar Lunacharsky and tolerated by Lenin, seemed final proof of the Village idea that political, economic and artistic change went together. No wonder Reed endured the abuse of Zinoviev and the repeated defeats over the labor issue at the Second Congress of the Communist International. The workers state was also a state for artists. It could seem a dream come true.

## IV

Reed's crucial internal struggles are only hinted at during "Reds." Of the commitment to Bolshevism, Max Eastman can say, "With him its a religion," and in an important scene Louise may confront him with the notion "You're an artist, Jack." But in the context of the film, neither of these statements points beyond itself. Yet to say that the work does not depict Reed's conflict over belief and art may be to belabor the obvious. "Reds" is not meant to be a psychological drama, but an interpersonal one, set against the movement of great historical events. The focus is clearly on Jack and Louise, on their stormy romance, breakups and reconciliations, on the inherent conflict of two-career households, the meaning of fidelity in an age of liberation, on the problematics of any relationship between men and women once the confining strictures of the bourgeois, nuclear family are left behind.

Some debate has already arisen over the film's portrait of the relationship. There seems to be general agreement that Louise is the more interesting of the two main characters -- after all, she grows, struggles and changes, whereas Jack is virtually the same in the last frame as in the first. But dispute comes over the extent to which "Reds" may be a feminist statement or merely another sophisticated reassertion of male supremacy. Advocates of the former position may see signs of Bryant's strength and independence in the affair with O'Neill, her job as a correspondent in France, her accepted demand that they go to Russia as a nonsexual team, her refusal to sanction his 1919 trip back to Moscow, and Reed's deathbed recognition that

they are "comrades." Opponents may stress her early lack of direction in Greenwich Village, the affair with O'Neill, the jealousy over Reed's affairs, her sexual capitulation during the ten days and the final journey to his side as an indication that this is business as usual between Hollywood men and women.

History can shed some light on this issue. That Louise was intelligent, talented and attractive is true; that they quarrelled over careers is likely, and over affairs, certain; that she left him to work in France in 1917 and deplored his return to Russia is accurate; that he loved her from the first week they met and was deeply devoted -- in his fashion -- to her right to the end is attested to in many letters and personal documents. But, as if fearing that only worldly accomplishment can make people love one another, "Reds" consistently inflates the historic importance of Louise and diminishes that of Jack. It accepts her untrue claim that she wrote for the Portland Oregonian before they met; it neglects to mention that Reed obtained her the job with the Wheeler syndicate for the trip to Europe; it fails to show that during the separation each was miserable without the other, and that she happily returned to him in New York; it suggests that during the Russian Revolution they were artistic equals, when a most casual reading of their works will show that Louise was a competent reporter in the presence of a great story and Jack a major journalist at the height of his powers; it shows Louise testifying to a Senate Subcommittee and fails to indicate that Reed spent far more time at the same witness table and outspokenly proclaimed, "I have always advocated a revolution in the United

States." Nor does the film give any indication that he stood trial for sedition with the other editors of the Masses.

The final section of the film, Reed's imprisonment in Finland and her dramatic journey towards reconciliation, is a closely-woven blend that contains more fancy than fact. To suggest that Reed was escaping the Comintern is to ignore that when arrested in Finland (in the hold of a ship, not on a hand propelled rail car) he was carrying more than \$15 thousand in diamonds and currency to help finance the Communist Party at home. During his confinement, communication did pass between the two, and only when Jack, after his release, cabled that he was returning to Moscow, did Louise leave the United States to join him. Her motives were more complex than the loving altruism portrayed in "Reds." During Reed's absence Louise had been living in Woodstock, New York, with the painter, Andrew Dasburg. From shipboard -- she did not stow away, but journeyed openly, with Hearst press credentials -- she wrote Dasburg that the reason for going was to keep Reed from coming home, where he would no doubt be jailed for sedition. Of his possible return, she said, "It would destroy us -- you can see that. I would destroy all three."

No doubt the crossing into Russia contained elements of danger, but neither fears of frostbite nor of a broken leg from skiing could have plagued Louise, who entered the country in August. And no, that tear-pulling scene on the station platform did not really take place. Before leaving for Baku on August 25, Reed had received a telegram saying that Louise would be in Moscow on his return. On September 25, he ran into her hotel room and they spent a pleasant ten

days together before he grew ill with typhus. During that final loving period, it is unlikely that Jack told her of the young Russian woman who had warmed his bed during their long separation.

# V

Like any work of art, "Reds" is more than the sum of its parts. For all its omissions, errors and shortcomings, the film contains far more serious historical data than almost any other such Hollywood effort. Obviously it is the first American motion picture to show a Communist as a decent human being. Beatty's John Reed is a nice guy, generally moral and upright, with a winsome touch of naivete. His forbears seem literary and fictional. Reed on screen is related to that old American type, the frontiersman, to Natty Bumppo and his latter-day incarnation, John Wayne. Strong and active in the world of men, he is occasionally boyish, shy and inarticulate with women (this despite his extensive sexual experience, always hinted at rather than shown). Reed makes radicalism acceptable by being a kind of left-wing Archie Bunker. That is, Bunker is a lovable bigot, Reed a lovable Commie. (Evidently, before its opening, Beatty took the film to the White House. President Reagan's reported comment on the work was favorable, though he evidently expressed regret that Reed did not live long enough to learn what Communism really is.)

Some of the political left have hailed "Reds" as a significant departure for Hollywood. Rightly so. How nice to have as a hero a genuine, historic radical. But here is a marvellous irony. So



desperate is the left for media heroes that it may wink at violations to its own, usually ignored, history. For years radicals have exposed the "ideology" of free enterprise, and in intellectual circles a cottage industry has grown up that applies Antonio Gramsci's powerful notion of the ruling classes cultural "hegemony" to a variety of historical situations. Yet do we recognize such "hegemony" when it appears among us? What is "Reds" but a flowering example of "hegemony" in full bloom?

Let me be specific here. "Reds" is no outright piece of fiction but a subtle restructuring of history. It humanizes a radical hero by domesticating him, putting his love life at center stage. (In Reed's case this is particularly problematic, for in his single autobiographical effort, written only for himself, he devotes only a couple of sentences in thirty pages to all his lovers, including Louise.) It plays with the issues of radicalism and revolution just enough to make them serious, but certainly not enough to inform the public as to what they really are. Nor does it show that the underlying conflict of the main character -- not the struggle between love and revolution, but between the demands of an ambitious self and those of a market economy -- still very much exists today.

In fact, what better example can we have of this dilemma than "Reds" itself. An immensely rich and popular star worries for a decade before making a film about a radical. When he does, the story can only be told within the confines of filmic conventions that serve to emasculate the basic vision of his hero. Thus politics and art take a back seat to love. Thus we have all those cute shticks left

over from some situation comedy: the puppy that runs upstairs every time Jack and Louise are in bed; Reed cooking dinner and spilling everything, or hitting his head repeatedly on the lamp in Petrograd, or telling a joke that amuses no one (a bit left over from "McCabe and Mrs. Miller"). Thus we have the Zhivago-like trek and the tear-jerking reunion. To argue, as some may do, that this is necessary for a big-budget film and a mass audience is only to prove the point. From its length, subject matter and approach, it appears that Beatty wished to make a bid for immortality, to create a great, serious work like "Citizen Kane." His inability to do so speaks volumes about the hegemony of commercial values.

In no way am I accusing Beatty of cowardice. The issue is deeper than the personal. My argument is simply that he, too, is trapped by the conventions and standards of one culture (which include the box office but are not exclusively monetary). Once in my presence Beatty said something like, "Nobody knows what history really is." Naively I took this to be a sophisticated statement about the multiplicity of interpretations inherent in any historical situation. I was wrong. What it represented was a fascination with history and a fear of its power to judge us. No wonder the film exhibits a deep ambivalence towards its main subject. No wonder it is necessary both to domesticate John Reed and occasionally to make him a bit of a buffoon. (Beatty once was reported to have said at Harvard that a committed person like John Reed always seemed to him "faintly ridiculous.") To take Reed's life and death seriously would be to see one's own commercial ventures for what they are, to recognize without

deception that while in many ways it is no doubt a brave undertaking, "Reds" also panders to popular prejudices and expectations and thus avoids the risk that serious art must take. John Reed would, I think, understand the problems with "Reds," but he might not be inclined to forgive them.

This harsh judgment is not directed at the filmmaker alone, but is meant to encompass many of us who sympathize with the left as well. Beatty has done a real service. He has given us a radical hero and more radical history than has every before been shown in an American film. If the film is popular among a wide spectrum of people, perhaps it is in part because we all want to be a bit radical, and yet well-off and comfortable, venturesome and yet safe. So did John Reed. But for him there came a time when contradictory desires could no longer be held together. Trapped by his own beliefs, Reed's deepest responses led to a militant anti-war stance, growing disillusionment with his homeland and, ultimately to death as a Soviet hero. He was a man who knew the taste of comfort and fame and ultimately found it less savory than that of truth.

The controlling metaphor of "Reds" is that of Reed chasing a military wagon that he never quite catches. This is our first and only glimpse of him in Mexico, and it is repeated in Russia just before the final reunion with Louise. My connection with the film may lead to a special view of this scene. In the shooting -- as in history -- Beatty/Reed made it onto the wagon in Russia; in Mexico, no such incident occurred. To me, then, the scene becomes self-referential, a statement more about "Reds" than about its subject. In

reality, Reed found his wagon, his cause, his revolution. Once he did so, neither love nor the desire to write, nor fears that bureaucracy were beginning to sour the revolution, could make him back down on his commitment.

The filmmaker is more ambivalent. Reed's story is Beatty's wagon, one he chased for over a decade, and even with the completion of "Reds" has not quite caught. To understand this, we may refer to Jefferson's prophetic insight that ours is somehow a culture dedicated to the pursuit of happiness (and not its attainment?). Perhaps this grows from a fear that finding happiness, which we know ultimately to be something internal ("The kingdom of God is within" or similar truths emanating from any of the great religious traditions), may entail a loss of the fame and fortune we are taught to equate with being loved. Either way, the dilemma is not merely that of Warren Beatty or John Reed. In the profoundest sense, the problems with "Reds" as history are very much our own.